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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000433

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SUBJECT: TONGAN NATIONAL COMMITTEE'S REPORT CALLS FOR ELECTED LEGISLATURE

REF: A. A) SUVA 262

- 1B. B)SUVA 233
- 1C. C)SUVA 100
- 1D. D)SUVA 97
- 1E. E)SUVA 28
- 1F. F)05 SUVA 613

Classified By: AMBASSADOR LARRY M. DINGER. SECTIONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

Summary

11. (C) The National Committee on Political Reform (NCPR) submitted its report to Tonga's Parliament on Oct. 3. The King received a copy a month ago. The report says Tonga's people want political reform but also want to protect traditional culture. The report recommends an all-elected, 26-member parliament, with an increase from nine to seventeen representatives directly elected by the general public. The 33 nobles would continue to elect nine representatives from among their number. The King would select the Prime Minister, and the PM would select the Cabinet, all from among the Members of Parliament. Reactions so far have been fairly positive. The new King and PM Sevele aim to appease both pro-democracy advocates and royalists by focusing reform, for now, on election/selection mechanics and by not formally addressing royal prerogatives. How long that strategy can succeed will depend on the King's willingness to voluntarily accept a subdued role. End Summary.

Committee Basics

12. (U) In October 2005, after a large pro-democracy march and petition, Tonga's Parliament formed the NCPR, which in December began extensive consultations with communities throughout Tonga, as well as with the large Tongan expatriate populations in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States. The NCPR chairman was the king's nephew, Prince Tu'i'ipelehake, until his untimely death in an auto accident in California in July. East-West Center Pacific Islands Development Program Director Dr. Sitiveni Halapua was influential in developing the consultation process, and he authored the Committee's report which currently is available only in Tongan. Halapua is working on an English version.

Presenting the Report

13. (U) Tonga's now-deceased king, Taufa'ahau Tupou IV, and current king, Siaosi Tupou V, received the draft report on August 30. A week and a half later, the king passed away. The new king has not made any public comment regarding the report. He previously indicated to the Ambassador that he supports political reforms but intends to retain some royal prerogatives (Refs A and D). His sister Princess Pilolevu

while opening the 2006 Legislative Assembly in June stated that the NCPR had the "full support of Government." However, she cautioned against following the examples of countries that "rushed into political reforms without the prerequisite preparations and the inevitable disastrous consequences." Halapua presented the report to Parliament on October 3. Following the initial presentation, Parliament has been examining the report and asking questions to the Committee.

Proposed Changes

¶4. (U) The report judges that Tongans are united in their desire for political change, but they also value highly the traditional social structure of the King, Nobles, and the people. The main reform proposal is a 26 member, all-elected parliament. Currently, the 34-person Parliament is composed of nine directly elected People's Representatives, nine Nobles' Representatives elected by Tonga's 33 Nobles, and 16 members of Cabinet. The King selects all Cabinet members, and until recently they all came from outside Parliament, and became Parliament members on selection. In effect, historically, the King controlled parliament with a large majority: his Cabinet and the Noble's Reps. The NCPR proposal would retain the nine Noble's seats and their restricted electorate, would eliminate Cabinet selections from outside Parliament, and would add eight new People's Rep seats, bringing the People's Rep total to 17. People's Reps for the main island, Tongatapu, would increase most dramatically, from three to seven, but Tongatapu would still be under-represented.

¶5. (C) Under the current system, the King appoints the Prime Minister, who traditionally was a royal or noble. Current PM Sevele is the first commoner in the role since a British subject in the late 1800s. The report proposes to limit the

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King's choice of PM to Members of Parliament. Until the last year and a half, the King selected members of his Cabinet without constraint, though not from among elected MPs. The NCPR proposes that the PM appoint his Cabinet entirely from among MPs. Reportedly, the NCPR does not address the King's currently broad substantive powers, though pro-democracy advocates have urged a limited, constitutional monarchy, akin to those of Japan or the UK.

Reactions

¶6. (U) The report's recommendations would certainly move Tonga toward a representative democracy, continuing the political reforms that have been taking place gradually during the past year, including the naming of commoner Sevele to be PM and Sevele's choosing new members of the Cabinet, with the King reportedly providing an automatic blessing. Parliament is currently looking closely at the report, and questions have focused in particular on the constriction of the king's appointive powers. By and large, public reaction seems to be muted but positive. Tonga's Cabinet is reportedly creating a nine-member commission (3 from Cabinet, 3 Nobles, and 3 People's Reps) to consider next steps. We also hear that pro-democracy parliamentarians will be introducing a bill calling for an early-2007 referendum.

¶7. (C) During the Ambassador's visit to Tonga for the late King's funeral, before the NCPR report had been made public, longtime democracy activist Akilisi Pohiva, who had heard leaks about the report, was unusually upbeat. He indicated that Tonga's reform process seems to be moving "in a better direction." He intends to continue complaining publicly, but mostly because he believes every government needs a vocal opposition. Another Peoples Rep, Clive Edwards, remained very skeptical, noting it remains to be seen how much of the King's broad powers will actually be curtailed. PM Sevele was keeping cards close to the vest, though he did mention a close-hold proposal to expand the number of People's Rep seats in Parliament and to apportion most of them to

Tongatapu. Sevele reiterated past assurances that he and the King have a plan to expand democracy in Tonga and to do so at a measured pace that will not threaten stability. (In the last few days, Sevele has said publicly that he may propose increasing People's Reps to 14 instead of 17.) Sevele told us that each time the King formally accedes to PM decisions on personnel and policy issues, precedent is established for a new "de facto" constitutional monarchy with limited powers, all without formal amendment of the Constitution. Sevele indicated any effort to adjust the Nobles' political role would be "too hard" for now.

Comment

¶8. (C) The NCPR's wide-reaching consultations have given the reform report an air of legitimacy. The lack of any major outcry from the pro-democracy camp and Pohiva's private positive comments are good signals. The sentiments of royalists are less clear; but the report's light touch regarding the King's powers and the emphasis on preserving the current cultural hierarchy may do the trick. The democratic ideal would be for Tonga to undertake an immediate transition to a formally limited "constitutional monarchy." Some activists will continue to press for that outcome. PM Sevele, buttressed by the NCPR report, has opted for a more gradual reform pace, attempting to appease both reform and royalist sentiments.

¶9. (C) A key factor for the success of Sevele's approach will be the royal family's willingness to be bound by new precedents that informally constrain power. The current King appears ready, to an extent, to be so constrained. Other royals appear less flexible in their thinking. The King's brother Prince Lavaka'ata, who recently was formally proclaimed Crown Prince, gave every indication last year when he, as PM, refused compromise during a public-service strike that he would stubbornly protect royal powers against democratic encroachment. If, one way or another, the perception of reform ends up appearing stymied, those segments of the Tonga public who vocally sought immediate democracy a year ago would likely become intensely frustrated yet again.

DINGER